Since first being elected to the House of Commons in 2000, Conservative MP Scott Reid has held constituency referendums that dictate how he votes on certain issues - those issues usually being ones that have a strong moral dimension to them or are particularly divisive or

controversial. The ways Reid has voted on same-sex marriage, abortion, cannabis legalization, and euthanasia have all been determined by these referendums. This process has earned him admiration from other MPs, and resulted in him winning in the Civic Engagement category of Macleans' 2017 Parliamentarian of the Year awards.

The success of these referendums at the riding level inevitably begs the question: what if this system could be expanded to the entire country? Unfortunately, referendums are almost never used at the federal level in Canada - the last one was in 1992, when voters rejected the proposed Charlottetown Accord. Before this, federal plebiscites (non-binding referendums) were held on WWII conscription in 1942 and alcohol prohibition in 1898. So as you can see, incredibly rare. As I discussed in a previous post on recall elections, this reluctance to create mechanisms for populist pro-democracy initiatives is likely due to the massive influence that a small group of elites has had over Canadian politics - an elite harbours much skepticism of the common people and their ability to make wise political decisions.

Despite this elite aversion to direct democracy, polls show that a sizeable majority of Canadians support these sorts of democratic initiatives. With that in mind, let's examine the case for holding more federal referendums.

Reasons for Holding Referendums

The first reason for holding more referendums at the federal level would be that governments often implement policies that are deeply unpopular with the general public and are often not in their best interest. Consider as an example the issue of the carbon tax. According to a Leger poll, 55% of Canadian want to either reduce or abolish the carbon tax, while just 18% favour continuing the current scheme of yearly carbon tax increases. Parental rights is a similar story, with 78% of Canadians in support of schools informing parents if a child changes their gender identification, while just 14% do not. However, the positions the current federal government has staked out on these issues align with a small minority of the population.

Another valid justification for making policy via referendums would be the noxious system of party discipline implemented by all the major political parties in Ottawa. Because of this system, MPs are expected to vote with their respective political parties almost all of the time. Failing to do this can result in being kicked off of committees or even being removed from caucus entirely. And without a political party, MPs have far less influence in the House of Commons and are almost certainly guaranteed to lose re-election. This means that in order to keep their jobs, MPs have to fall in line with the party whip, even if that means abandoning the wishes of the people they represent and voting for policies their constituents don't support.

Finally, referendums can completely remove the effects of lobbying by special interest groups from the policy-making process. Lobbyists distort the making of legislation by pressuring MPs and Cabinet Ministers to adopt policies that favour their own self-interest - whether that be the self-interest of large corporations or identity groups. This is illustrated in YouTuber JJ McCullough's testimony against Bill C-11 at the Standing

Committee on Canadian Heritage and the subsequent video that he made about the experience, which provides a revealing glimpse into the legislative process in Canada and the degree to which it has been hijacked by powerful interest groups. Of the nine witnesses invited to testify at the committee that day, eight of them were lobbyists for special interests while McCullough was the only social media content creator invited. It is very clear that Bill C-11 was designed to prop up legacy media corporations, with the average media consumer suffering and having their preferences ignored as a result. Putting proposed broadcasting regulations directly to the public for a vote would circumvent these special interests and result in regulations - and policies more broadly - that actually reflect the will of the people.

Designing a Referendum

Even if policy questions are directed via a referendum, it isn't automatically insured that the power of special interests has been completely thwarted. There are still ways that referendums can be

swayed to favour one side or another. My focus in this next section will be on providing details on how ensure that referendums are fair and accurate measures of the public will.

1. To start, the question being posed to voters must be completely neutral. Long and confusing questions or questions that use charged or loaded language can mislead voters and tilt the results toward a particular side (as was the case during the 1980 referendum on Quebec Sovereignty).
2. In the House of Commons, the second reading stage of the legislative process is when the *general idea* of a bill is debated and voted on, whereas third reading is when the *final version* of a bill is given the same treatment. The proposition being voted on during a referendum should ideally mirror the version of a bill at third reading stage, where all of the details of the proposal have been ironed out. Doing this eliminates any ambiguity with respect to what is being voted on.
3. Limits need to be placed on how much money can be spent by one entity or individual over the course of the campaign. This will prevent large corporations from injecting their cash into the race in order to influence the results.
4. Referendums should be administered by Elections Canada - this will ensure that election rules are followed and any breach of these rules can be investigated.

Conclusion

Canada is, and always has been, a democracy. It is a state that, theoretically at least, is run to serve the interests of the average citizen. The legislative process in the House of Commons, though, can churn out laws that are not in the best interests of the public. Referendums can play a critical role in fixing this as they transfer this decision-making process away from bureaucrats and into the hands of the people who should actually run this country - the common people.

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